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Research Article

## Theoretical Theatre: Harnessing the Power of Comedy to Teach Social Science Theory

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## Abstract

Role playing is increasingly used in European Studies and political science, to foster students' understanding of social science theories. Generally, role playing is only done by students. Not so in Theoretical Theatre, a teaching innovation which puts the onus on teachers to act. In our performances, teachers embody competing theories and enact dramatic scenarios in front of, and in collaboration with, their student audience. We explain how we developed Theoretical Theatre and contextualise it in the pedagogical literature of games and simulations, and of Drama In Education. We reflect on our experience of performing across four modules since 2012, and on our students' feedback, to discuss three key themes emerging from our practice: making theory more interesting and engaging, easier to understand and apply; and changing classroom dynamics and engagement. We outline the challenges and opportunities in sustaining this teaching method and transferring it to other settings and disciplines.

## Keywords

Role playing; theatre; environment; methods; teaching; simulations

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## INTRODUCTION

Theories are at the heart of social science teaching, the centre piece used to foster students' analytical capacities and their ability to interpret the world. Yet, teaching social science theories can be a very complicated endeavour (Asal et al. 2014). On the one hand, teachers have to convey the usefulness of theories to students who may never have felt a need for them. On the other hand, theories offer students different ways of understanding the world and they are often encouraged to think critically about the limits and benefits of each of them (Boyer et al. 2006, p.67). Understanding the role of theories in social science is a 'threshold concept', which students are required to grasp effectively before they are able to access and succeed in more advanced learning (Kiley & Wisker 2009, p.431). To address this, we present Theoretical Theatre (TT), a new award-winning team-teaching method designed to engage students in active learning about competing theories, with wide applicability across the curriculum. In TT, theories are 'not merely discussed, but embodied' (Jacobs 2010, p.2) by a group of teachers and/or students, bringing conceptual debates to life as interacting characters in semi-improvised performances.

We provide a brief introduction to TT as a teaching method and explain how we have used it across four different modules in environmental social science from the 2012-2013 academic year to 2015-2016. We then situate TT within innovative teaching literatures, arguing that while some of its elements are similar to simulations, Drama in Education discussions shed light on how TT redraws the relationship between teachers and students. With reference to these pedagogical perspectives, we critically reflect on our experience, and our students' feedback, to discuss three key themes emerging from our practice: TT makes theory more interesting and engaging, easier to understand and apply; and it changes classroom dynamics and engagement. We discuss the challenges and opportunities in developing TT as a team, sustaining this teaching method over time, and transferring it to other settings and disciplines.

## THEORETICAL THEATRE: A TEACHING INNOVATION

TT is an innovative teaching tool using semi-improvised comedy performances where teams of 2-5 teachers collaborate to portray different characters who physically embody theories in interactive scenarios. We use props and costumes to enliven the 'extra-ordinary' lecture setting. Characters may get along or argue with each other, reflecting academic and policy debates between different perspectives. Using comedy helps students make an emotional connection with complex material, and results in active and deeper learning (McCarron & Baden 2008) by fostering a relaxed, fun and engaging atmosphere (Torok et al. 2004) .

The School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia is interdisciplinary; students with natural science backgrounds commonly encounter social science for the first time in our modules. We found that students struggled to comprehend competing theories about society, and that they did not distinguish the nuances between different theories, or had difficulties applying a theory. Sometimes students advocated 'adding together' all the different perspectives to get the 'best' aggregated approach which appeared to be 'common sense' and 'the best of all worlds'.

Consequently, we created TT to help students better comprehend the underlying basis of competing theories of society, and encourage them to reflect critically about their strengths and weaknesses. The performances we have developed to date are presented as exceptional lectures, one per module (as outlined below), to convey theoretical threshold concepts. In some cases, follow-up activities involve students developing or adopting and performing concept-characters themselves to further deepen their understanding. This is a deeply experiential way to learn: as drama pedagogue Gilberto Scaramuzzo asserts 'if we want to speak [on a topic] we must learn to become [the topic]' (Grove 2015, p.22), and pedagogical work on humour and improvisation as learning tools attest to the strength of this active learning (Berk & Trieber 2009)

## DEVELOPING THEORETICAL THEATRE

We adopted TT as an evolving experiment in improving our teaching effectiveness to address the recurrent teaching challenges explained above. We developed our first prototype in 2012. We began by drafting notes about how the theories (each represented by a different lecturer) of sustainable consumption interpret the world and address key challenges, e.g. 'how can we encourage more people to use public transport' or 'why do we consume as we do?' These became quite elaborate scripts, but the delivery was still essentially a multi-voiced lecture. It lacked dynamism and we felt there was more we could do to bring the debates to life. None of us had acting, theatre or drama training nor training in employing humour in the classroom.

We started working with an expert in comedy improvisation, Charlotte Arculus<sup>1</sup>, who used drama and improvisation games to help us lose our inhibitions and build trust as a team. We learned about performance skills, stage technique, the power of silence and stillness, awareness of the ensemble, and the importance of taking a risk, we began to feel comfortable in letting go of the aura of serious authority that as academics we usually feel we must convey, and embrace creativity and silliness to help us communicate more effectively, showing us that "humorous communication behaviors can be improved with training and practice" (Banas et al. 2011, p.138)

We then focussed on the performance piece itself, setting the scripts aside and thinking instead about the characters we would be enacting. What kind of car would they drive? Who was their hero? What did they eat for lunch? Answering these mundane questions helped us create fleshed-out characters who we would pretend to be. Thus, characters became real people (representing

theories) with backstories, hobbies, and opinions about each other. The interactions among them were funny and we enjoyed seeing each other play these characters. And once we 'knew' our characters and their views, the scripts were not needed. The drama essentially wrote itself, based on the improvisation of the characters' interpersonal dynamics.

### ***Sustainable Consumption***

The first performance we created was for a Masters-level module on *Sustainable Consumption* (20-30 students, over 12 weeks), and addressed the question of 'why do we consume the way we do?' It portrays a *Question Time*-style debate between four competing theories of consumption behaviour: logical Rational Choice Theory, gossipy Social Psychology, busy Social Practice Theory and puppet master Systems of Provision, plus the curious (and importantly, neutral) show host (see Shwom & Lorenzen (2012) for a comparison of the four approaches). Students choose one theory to apply to a case study, and critique, in their assessed work. Prior to TT, students often attempted to aggregate all the theories despite the fact that the theories fundamentally disagree with each other. Our performance brings those disagreements to life. In a follow-up workshop, students adopt the characters themselves, and this really cements their understanding as they physically embody the concepts.

### ***Theoretical Blind Date***

Developed originally as part of a second-year undergraduate module Energy and People (60-70 number of students, over 12 weeks), Theoretical Blind Date involves three characters (a business person, a policy maker and an environmental activist) facing 'real world energy problems' posing questions to three different theories (theories of behaviour change; social practice and transitions – each played by a different lecturer) that are 'hidden' behind a screen. The theories provide answers to the questions posed derived from their particular theoretical standpoint. Finally, after some vocalised deliberation and with the help of the audience of students shouting out their opinions, the character asking the question then decides which theory to take out on a 'date', in which they are tasked with the challenge of solving the problem posed in the question. Toward the end of the module, the students themselves then engage in a group activity in which they have to decide how each of the different dates went. They then have to put on a short performance to the rest of the class, playing the role of the characters and the theories themselves.

### ***Theatre of Power***

This performance illuminates the three dimensions of power as developed by Dahl (1961) Bachrach and Baratz (1962) and Lukes (2005) which are central to the second-year module on *Environmental Politics and Policymaking* (40-60 students, over 12 weeks). It is the first of several theoretical approaches students are exposed to in the module, and many adopt it in their case study. We noticed over the years that the distinction between the dimensions was often poorly understood by the students. We devised a half hour performance aiming at better fleshing out the key differences and commonalities between dimensions, as an add-on to a standard lecture. Following a 20-minute conventional presentation about applying dimensions of power to a historical case study (the 1932 Mass Trespass on Kinder Scout), the first dimension of power (holding a sword to represent brute force) interrupts the lecturer and explains how it interpret the events. The two other dimensions

(the second carries a magnifying glass to investigate hidden agendas, and the third a magician's wand to signify thought-control) take issue with the first dimension imposing its views and engage in presenting their perspectives. Questions from the student audience then start a debate on the pros and cons of each dimension.

### *Swipe Right for Sustainability*

'Swipe Right for Sustainability' is our latest performance. It presents two competing approaches to sustainable development (Gareth 'green growth' Juggernaut, and Daisy 'de-growth' Beansprout) using a dating app, and going on a date. It was developed for the first-year undergraduate module *Sustainability, Society and Biodiversity* (154 students in 2015/16, over 12 weeks), and has since been used with Masters students on *Sustainable Consumption* (20 students in 2016, over 12 weeks). This piece was designed to help students grasp that there is no correct definition of sustainable development, but rather different perspectives (Hopwood et al. 2005). The subject is first introduced using a traditional lecture comparing and contrasting the two approaches, followed in a subsequent class by the performance. Although Daisy and Gareth initially appear to have so much in common (they are both keen advocates of 'sustainability'), their differing views soon become apparent and the date doesn't end well. The drama and comedy emerge as their dating optimism withers during the course of their conversation. Students follow-up by creating new dating profiles for the characters, and can also enact the characters themselves to give a 'date report'.

TT performances are thus all based on a common, highly flexible approach: using teachers to embody theories and interact in character in front of as well as with the students (Table 1).

	<b>Sustainable Consumption</b>	<b>Blind Date</b>	<b>Theatre of Power</b>	<b>Swipe Right for Sustainability</b>
<b>Target audience and module description</b>	40min performance, first delivered in 2012 for Masters-level postgraduate students (20-30 students)	40-50 min performance first delivered in 2014 for 2 <sup>nd</sup> -3 <sup>rd</sup> year undergraduates (60 students in 2013/14; 70 in 2014/15)	25 min performance first delivered in 2013, for 2 <sup>nd</sup> year undergraduates. (55 students in 2012/13, 40 in 2014/15 and 60 in 2015/16)	20-40 min performance first delivered in 2015 for 1 <sup>st</sup> year undergraduates (150 students) and in 2016 for Masters-level postgraduates (20 students).
<b>Learning objectives</b>	To understand critical similarities and differences between competing theories of consumption behaviour.	To introduce students to a range of theories that explore issues of social and technical change in relation to the energy system.	To introduce students to how the three dimensions of power explain events and the relationships of power among social actors differently	To understand critical similarities and differences between two competing perspectives on sustainable development
<b>Topic</b>	Consumption behaviour	Energy system change	1932 Mass Trespass and access to land in the UK	Sustainable development
<b>Theories</b>	Rational Choice, Social Psychology, Social Practice Theory, Systems	Behaviour Change; Social Practice Theory; Transitions Theory	The three dimensions of power	De-growth and Green Growth

	of Provision			
<b>Staff needed</b>	5 teachers (Show host, 4 theory characters)	5 teachers (Show host; 3 theory characters, and one teacher playing businessperson, policy-maker and activist)	4 teachers (facilitator, 3 theory characters)	2 teachers (degrowth and green growth characters)
<b>Role for students</b>	As an active audience, they are invited to ask the panel of theories questions about sustainable consumption policy and practice.	As an active audience. They are asked to shout out their opinions about which theory each character should choose to go on a date with, with a few students selected to explain their reasoning in slightly more depth.	Passive viewers of the performance initially; then invited by the facilitator to express their views (yes / no) on the views presented by the different theories, and ask questions (planted among the audience in advance, as well as their own)	Active audience in the run-up to the date (giving feedback to both characters), then passive during the date.
<b>Follow up activities</b>	In a follow-up workshop, students work in small groups to adopt one of the theory-characters and tackle a sustainable consumption problem (e.g. food waste) from that perspective. Students represent the characters in a short classroom performance and debate in character.	A follow-up seminar, towards the end of the module puts the students in the role of the characters and the theories and requires them to perform to the class how they think the dates between the characters went (i.e. how did the theories approach the problems, how did the characters respond to this etc.).	Students encouraged to reflect on these theories and how they can be applied to understand contested situations during the seminars they present in weeks following the performance. Many students also apply these theories in their case study coursework.	Following the performance, students work in small groups to create new dating profiles for the two characters which bring out their core differences as well as their similarities. Students can also enact the characters to give date reports on each other, as an alternative, more interactive way of presenting this analysis.

Table 1: a comparison of all four performances (2012-2016)

## RECONNECTING THEORETICAL THEATRE TO THE PEDAGOGICAL LITERATURE

Although TT was born out of our own experimentations in response to a recurring teaching challenge in our School, it fits within a much broader movement aiming to push for a more learner-oriented approach (Buckley & Reidy 2014, p.342) to address the limits of conventional lectures (Asal

et al. 2014). There is a growing consensus that lectures on their own are not sufficient to help students apprehend abstract concepts. Asal *et al.* argue that lectures are mostly characterised by passive learning methods through which students can only gain superficial knowledge ‘because they are not forced to engage the course material in a way that they can make the knowledge they gained truly their own’ (Asal et al. 2014, p.347). Active learning is therefore a more effective alternative (Freeman et al, 2014), and, in addition to a vast array of participative learning techniques and tools, increasingly simulations, games and role play have been developed in the social sciences to enhance teaching effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> However, to date, this move towards active learning and simulations been limited to students-in-role and has neglected the role of teachers in enacting dramatic scenarios. We argue that TT can be understood as a hybrid between simulations – widely used in political science and international relations teaching in higher education internationally – and Drama in Education approaches, mostly used in primary education in the UK. TT uses drama and comedy to ‘prevent academic content from appearing lifeless, abstract and beyond understanding’ (Smith & Herring 1993, p.419). In this section, we compare and contrast our own experience of TT with both literatures.

### THEORETICAL THEATRE, A SORT OF SIMULATION?

Games and simulations are an increasingly popular alternative to a ‘lecture only’ type of teaching (Lightfoot & Maurer 2013). They are extremely varied, ranging from a semester-long simulation of the administrative functioning of the European Commission (Giacomello 2011) to a series of short games held during one lecture (Asal et al. 2014). Some may require specifically tailored material (Usherwood 2015) or use pre-existing material such as card games (Boyer et al. 2006).

The approach that we present in this article is in many ways similar to games and simulations, moving away from simply ‘telling’ students, favouring instead ‘showing’ or ‘role playing’ (Paschall & Wustenhagen 2012), which can encourage ‘students away from the security of a singular, authoritative narrative’ (Stevens 2015, p.490). TT also uses role playing to make theories ‘clear in a way that lectures and discussions do not’ (Asal 2005, p.361), and requires an important amount of preparatory work by students and staff, often including more than one member of staff (Usherwood 2015). As with games and simulations, TT takes place within the context of a broader module, alongside traditional lectures, and requires careful articulation between the innovative and traditional elements of teaching (Raiser et al. 2015, p.2). Finally, as simulations and games, TT happens in conjunction with discussion and / or debrief with students (Boyer et al. 2006, p.73).

But TT radically differs from games and simulation with regards to the relation between teachers and students. In games and simulations, ‘the student becomes the lab rat and then gets to discuss the experiment’ (Asal 2005, p.361) and, for example, starts behaving and interacting as members of a political institution. During games or simulations lecturers can act as ‘facilitator, control team, and/or observer’ (Asal & Kratoville 2013, p.138) ensuring everything is running smoothly (Buckley & Reidy 2014). During a TT session, however, the onus is on the teachers. Contrary to simulations, they retain more control, but it is up to them to create “humorous stimuli relevant to the course taught” (Ziv 1988, p.13) by putting on a costume, adopting a role, behaving sometimes foolishly, to harness the power of role play and comedy to introduce students to social science theories.

These teaching methods also differ in terms of how they treat theories. In many simulations, students engage with theories before (to prepare) and after the performance (to make sense of what happened). These reflections often require prompting by teachers (Asal & Kratoville 2013), as students can struggle to make the connection between what they experienced and the theories they



are taught. TT also aims to make students reflect on the different theories and how to apply them, but theories are at the heart of the performance. Teachers embody theories, turning key social science theories into full-fledged characters with a name, profession, hobbies, favourite food and holiday destination.

Thus, while TT, games and simulations use role play, they do so in a markedly different manner. As the section below explores, the central role of teachers in role-playing brings TT closer to the Drama in Education literature through the notion of teacher-in-role (Prendiville 2000).

### THEORETICAL THEATRE BY 'TEACHERS-IN-ROLE'

Drama in Education is an approach which sees students engage in drama, often through improvisation (Fleming 2010), together with their teacher(s). It was developed in the UK from the 1970s onward (Heathcote & Herbert 1985). The uses of Drama in Education have become increasingly diverse over time (Lee 2014). Solo dramas, monologues (Kemeh 2015) and 'hot-seating' -where students question a teacher-in-role (Pearce & Hardiman 2012)- do not necessarily require students and teachers role-playing together.

One of the central elements of this literature is the pedagogical strategy of 'teacher-in-role': teachers interacting with students while 'in role', as part of a group or during solo drama. Two debates regarding 'teacher-in-role' were particularly helpful to build and reflect on TT: what exactly are the teachers up to – is it acting or not? And how does theatre redraw the relationship between teachers and students?

#### *Is teaching acting?*

Early literature on Drama in Education argued forcefully that teacher-in-roles were not acting. For Prendiville (2000, p.12), teacher-in-role is 'not about putting on a performance and becoming theatrical, if you do that, you push the children away from you'. Ackroyd-Pilkington contended that rejecting acting may appear reassuring and persuasive to 'non-specialists to take on roles' (2001, p.21). Furthermore, acting tends to be 'associated with falsehood [...] not deemed appropriate for the worthy and serious endeavours of classroom drama' (Ackroyd-Pilkington 2001, p.20). But such rejection is problematic, as it tends to underplay the skills required and also the creativity of role-playing (Ackroyd-Pilkington 2002, p.74).

Critically, asking whether 'teacher-in-role' is a performance leads us to consider how teaching, in all its varied forms, is a performance (Schonmann 2005, p.287). As Jacobs argues, 'In many ways, a teacher is like a live-theatre actor. A teacher has an audience of students, and has to perform in front of and for (and in interaction with) that audience' (Jacobs 2010, p.2). Yet we would argue that performing as a lecturer is not the same as performing a character embodying a theory as we do in TT. Building on theatrical concepts, Schonmann (2005) argues these two types of performances are subsumed under the 'role of the teacher' in a binary understanding of teaching in which the only distinction is between the person and their role. Adopting an alternative triadic view of teaching allows distinguishing between the person, their professional role as a teacher, and the character, e.g. the theory embodied (Schonmann 2005; Kempe 2012).

### *Changing how teachers are perceived?*

Aitken (2007, pp.91-92) argues that theatre relationships – be they in a real theatre or in a classroom – require a ‘shared understanding of how the fiction is to be distinguished from reality, what is to be considered of value, the behaviours that will support the relationship’ as well as, critically for TT ‘who will have the power to perform’.

These decisions are up to the teacher – the ‘relationship managers’ (Aitken 2007) – who need to communicate them to the students. Crucially, teachers have to take into account the pre-existing relationship with their students. When do teachers behave as ‘teachers’, and when are they ‘teachers-in-role’? And does changed behaviour from teachers implies changed behaviour from students as well?

Props and costumes are frequently used to mark the changed relationship (Prendiville 2000, p.12)

Consequently, we built clear demarcation using props, costumes, music and lighting to set apart performances in which we appeared ‘in character’ from other lectures. In Theoretical Blind Date, for example, we have music and title credits to mark its beginning and end, props on the stage in the form of seats for each of the characters (in costume) and a screen to keep the date ‘blind’.

### *New roles for students?*

TT does not only change how teachers behave, it also offers different ways for students to engage. Based on the literature, we could expect during the performance, students to change from just attending a lecture, to being part of an audience, ‘aware of the responses of other audience members’ (Bundy et al. 2013, p.156) following both what happens during the performance and how their peers react to it. In the audience, students are exposed to a live performance, and to their teachers taking a risk – which is often positively perceived by students (Bundy et al. 2013).

In Theoretical Blind Date for example, students are explicitly invited to participate and at various points are required to shout out their opinions about which theory matches a particular character. Over and above these explicit invitations, however, students watching the performance tend to laugh (or groan) at the jokes, to film parts of the performance on their smart phones and are generally very active engaged in the performance. In the second half of most of the performances, students have the opportunity to ask questions of the teachers ‘in character’. Students also make use of questions planted beforehand amongst the audience to encourage interaction.

Therefore, TT can be conceived as a hybrid between two strands of innovative teaching: Drama In Education and simulations and games. It can be expected to change how we teach, adding a third dimension (the character) to our teaching, as well as affect how students engage in the classroom. The next section compares these expectations from the literature to student voices (Stevens 2015) gathered in our evaluations.

## **EVALUATING THEORETICAL THEATRE**

TT was born experimentally out of a desire to encourage our students to engage with social science theories and thus to try and improve their understanding. Rather than being driven by the wider pedagogic literature on Drama in Education or teacher-in-role (see above), we have come to evaluate TT against this literature more recently.

In the first year of running the original Sustainable Consumption TT in 2012 we noted that the overall quality of the coursework students produced was considerably higher than any previous cohort: the average grade jumped from 60 percent to 67 percent. Whilst this is far from a robust or conclusive result, it did encourage us to persevere in developing TT and to make use of several other techniques, especially student surveys, for monitoring its effectiveness (Baranowski & Weir 2015).

Both the Sustainable Consumption and Theoretical Blind Date variants of TT have been regularly assessed via open-ended mid- and end-of-module reviews conducted in class with the students (mid-module reviews conducted a week or two after the performance). In these, students write anonymous comments on sticky notes under three headings: 'what worked well on the module?', 'what didn't work so well', and 'how can we improve the module next year'. It is striking that TT usually garners more positive comments than any other aspect of the modules.

In addition, for Theatre of Power, follow-up online surveys (2-3 weeks later) conducted focussed predominantly on whether and how the performance increased student understanding of key concepts. Response rates were low, with 14/55, 7/40 and 16/60 completed surveys in 2013, 2015 and 2016 respectively. We asked students if they thought the performance was insightful and helped them understand the theories, how they would describe it (from a menu of options including fun, dull, boring, interesting), what they liked and didn't like, how it could be improved and whether it should be performed for next year's class.

There was also a more extensive follow-up online survey for Swipe Right for Sustainability, involving a focus on increased understanding as well as the extent to which the performance encouraged students to think about theory and to talk about it with others (55/110 response rate, conducted 1-2 weeks after the class). In addition to quantitative results, qualitative responses (both referred to in the section below) were elicited through the following questions: 'how did it change your view of the module or your degree as a whole?', 'how did it change your view of the lecturers themselves?', 'any other comments?'.

We now reflect, in turn, on three core themes emerging from this student feedback: i) making theory more interesting and engaging; ii) making theory easier to understand and apply, and iii) changing dynamics and engagement in the classroom.

### **MAKING THEORY MORE INTERESTING AND ENGAGING**

A core aim of TT is to encourage students to engage with theory more enthusiastically by making it grounded, interesting and valuable rather than abstract, complex and unhelpful. Student feedback from across all TT variants suggests strong success in achieving this aim in two ways. First, as the following quotations show, students regularly report that a TT performance is more interesting and engaging than a conventional lecture.

'You've helped me get excited about theory!' (Swipe Right, 2016)

'Theoretical Blind Date! Highly entertaining with great interaction and learning as well. Unique and interesting.' (Theoretical Blind Date, 2014)

'Interesting and mostly fun alternative to 'dry' lectures.' (Theatre of Power, 2016)

Second, the students also regularly note that TT encouraged them to pay more attention in class and increased their motivation to study beyond the classroom itself. For example:

'It was a bit of a surprise at the end of the lecture – good way of getting us to pay attention! Helped my understanding a lot.' (Theatre of Power, 2015)

'It... made me more motivated to study.' (Swipe Right, 2016)

This increased motivation and excitement about theory seems to relate to the fact that, through the performance, students were able to witness the passion and enthusiasm of their lecturers. Several quotes illustrate this more 'human' connection with theory that TT generates:

'Lecturers are normal human beings trying to teach subjects they're passionate about and aren't as scary as they sometimes seem!!!' (Swipe Right, 2016)

'I like the fact that it came out of nowhere. It was so surprising. Everyone seemed really passionate and enthusiastic.' (Theatre of Power, 2015)

In this respect, it appears to matter significantly that it is the lecturer him/herself who is doing the performing, rather than a professional actor.

### **MAKING THEORY EASIER TO UNDERSTAND AND APPLY**

Baranowski & Weir argue 'that gauging what students learned is unquestionably more difficult than determining how much they enjoyed a simulation experience' (2015, p.396), but that doing so is necessary to evaluate whether an innovation was truly successful. Here, student feedback suggests that TT has fostered students' understanding in different ways. Survey results suggest that students think TT significantly improves their understanding. For Theatre of Power, 88% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the performance had helped them understand key aspects of each dimension of power in 2013 and this rose to 100% in 2015. For Swipe Right, 78% felt it was better at helping them learn key concepts than a normal lecture.

Students' open-ended comments provide some insight into these numbers. First, students argue that the performances make theory seem clear and simple:

'I liked the three different characters playing the three dimensions of power - made it clear to see the separate ideas.' (Theatre of Power, 2016)

'Theoretical Blind Date made the theories so easy to understand.' (Theoretical Blind Date, 2015)

Whilst we have evidently thought hard about how to clearly communicate theoretical ideas through TT, we have also strived to ensure we do not dumb-down complex theoretical ideas. Indeed, we use aspects TT as a means of demonstrating the more in-depth debates between different theoretical approaches. As such, the fact that students feel TT improves their understanding stems from the performance as a medium of communication rather than from simplification of content.

A second reason that students felt TT increased their understanding emerges from the fact that TT appears to turn theory into something students want to discuss with others:

'It improved my understanding a lot quicker than merely reading and making notes about the theories, and... generated much enthusiastic discussion between the students which reinforced the concepts effectively and made them interesting to explore.' (Sustainable Consumption, 2014)

For the Swipe Right performance, results show that TT encourages students to talk to others about the performances with 76% saying they spoke about it with their classmates, 74% with other students, and 44% with friends or family outside UEA. One student commented:

'I enjoyed telling my parents all about it and ended up giving them a lesson on types of sustainability.' (Swipe Right, 2016)

A third explanation emerges from the fact that several students noted that the characters help them to identify with different theoretical approaches and thus think about how that character might respond in real world settings:

'Love the theoretical Blind Date which we can put into any situation and go through each theory. Very good practice.' (Theoretical Blind Date, 2015)

'I like that you gave a real-life example and applied the theories of power to a case study.' (Theatre of Power, 2016)

These comments appear to support the value of theories being embodied rather than merely discussed or taught. TT seems to allow students to identify with how a lecturer becomes a particular perspective in the performance and apply this themselves beyond the classroom.

## CHANGING DYNAMICS AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

Whilst the core aims of TT are to increase student engagement with and understanding of theory, a side-benefit of the performances has been improved student engagement in the classroom. This echoes Banas et al's (2011, p.130) statement that "the positive effect generated through humour may improve the classroom environment by helping to relieve tension and student anxiety", Student feedback identifies two reasons for this.

First, the performances changed how the students perceived lecturers themselves and made them seem like 'normal human beings'. This theme was widely represented in student feedback with 56% of students who completed the follow-up survey for the Swipe Right performance:

'[It] made the lecturers seem more approachable and less intimidating ... [so] it was easier to participate.' (Swipe Right, 2016)

'I felt more comfortable asking questions to lecturers.' (Swipe Right, 2016)

Mid-term reviews of Theoretical Blind Date received similar reviews:

"Enjoy the interactive approach adopted - makes you feel involved - engages everybody" (Theoretical Blind Date, 2015)

"I feel most confident in this module about voicing my opinion and generally speaking in class. Have gained confidence." (Theoretical Blind Date, 2015)

Second, and closely related, students also commented that TT created an 'informal and fun' atmosphere which made them more confident to take risks in class and play with, test out and try to apply the new theoretical ideas they are being exposed to. Although we have found this to apply equally across year groups, these side-benefits seem likely to be especially significant and valuable for first year students and those less used to participate in class discussions. We are aware that

collecting student feedback in comparable forms would be valuable to us and aim to do so in future evaluations of TT across our teaching.

In summary, the various methods of gathering student feedback we have used suggest strongly that TT not only achieves its aims but also, and perhaps more importantly, carries a number of additional benefits around student engagement, risk-taking and confidence in class that have the potential to improve student performance more widely. Nonetheless, despite TT's apparent benefits, there are many important challenges and areas for further development that remain to be further explored, to which we now turn.

## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER DEVELOPING THEORETICAL THEATRE**

TT has been recognised for its innovativeness in teaching, contributing to two of the authors winning UEA Teaching Excellence Awards, and a further University Teaching Fellowship. TT was a highlight of the SCORAI teaching benchmarking exercise and features prominently at pedagogical conferences; it has also been performed as a keynote presentation at UEA's Learning and Teaching Day 2016, which has encouraged colleagues to adopt it in their own teaching. To enable us to help transfer TT, and also to monitor our practice, evaluate progress and change, we have developed and made available a resource hub through our website<sup>3</sup>. It contains resources, experiences, supporting best practice and inspiring educators world-wide who would wish to adopt and adapt TT to innovate, build and transfer skills, and make teaching fun.

Herewith we take inspiration to reflect on the opportunities and challenges associated with TT (within UEA and externally) and outline what the future of comedy in the classroom looks like from our perspective.

For us, TT has been an unexpected positive team-building exercise. Our performances were shaped with the participation of colleagues. Reciprocity resulted in making us more aware of, and participant in, the teaching conducted across the School, and helped the spread of innovative teaching across the curriculum.

Despite its inherent flexibility, TT as any kind of team-led innovation, relies on building and sustaining a team over time. TT necessitates a group of dedicated people enthusiastic and willing to use improvisation and comedy to expose students to theories in an alternative to standard lectures. When this group changes over time, the challenge becomes how to adapt TT so that it can still be performed. One option we have successfully undertaken to date is the regular training of teachers willing to participate in TT, who view this as a way to develop skills and abilities as well as introduce a smile into the classroom. However, relying on a shrinking pool of teachers may put undue pressure on them. We have therefore started exploring other alternatives outlined here.

### ***Working with PhD students and Early-Career Researchers***

In recent years, we have offered the opportunity to PhD students and early-career researchers to assist with in-role performance. Engagement with TT from enthusiastic researchers has enabled some of the TT performances to take place over several years; conversely, we now experience a paucity of new recruits, due to a variety of reasons. As a temporary measure, involvement of researchers can be productive, but it does not resolve longer-term staffing issues. A lower resource TT option, has been devised in response to this challenge (see below).

### *Video recording*

We have started recording our TT performances (see our website), in order to have them available for reflection, demonstration and training purposes as well as for use in the classroom should the TT not be deliverable. However, this substitute does not fully convey the spontaneity of the performance, the direct enactment in front of the students and the improvisation (which by its very nature changes every time TT takes place). A concern is that this mode, although less 'risky', removes the element of direct performance -- student engagement may be reduced, lessening the effectiveness of TT.

### *Devising smaller and simpler performances*

The performances we present in this paper vary in length and in the number of teachers delivering them, making TT malleable and possible for both small and larger teams. Team size is driven by the number of theories for students to familiarise themselves with and the scenario or format devised. Crucially performances 'need only be as complicated as the educational goal demands' (Asal & Kratoville 2013, p.137). Examples such as the *Swipe Right for Sustainability* performance indicates that only two teachers may be needed to show profound theoretical divergences. Moreover, some elements of TT can also be led by only one teacher. When presenting TT in conferences, we found that simply constructing a character on paper – similar to students re-writing dating profiles after the *Swipe Right for Sustainability* performance – is an interesting exercise which allows an individual or group to identify and discuss key elements of one or more theories. Contrary to full-fledged performances, developing character sheets does not require the support of a broader team, nor long preparation. It is a low-resource TT. Thus the 'concept in character' TT model has a wide range of potential applications, and can be adapted in a variety of disciplines and teaching contexts. We have tried it at a variety of conferences with positive feedback. For example, at EUROTLC16 the character development led some participants to argue that Realism was just like Justin Bieber.

### *Training needs*

We have argued earlier that in TT the distinction between our professional role (as teacher) and character (as a specific theory) is critical. It points towards specific skills that are not cultivated through our training to be teachers. However, we have found training in performance, improvisation and comedy skills absolutely key in facilitating becoming 'teacher-in-role' and engaging with students and colleagues in a radically different manner.

Accessing this type of training will depend on resource availability. We would recommend initially seeking and undertaking relevant staff training that may already be offered institutionally (e.g. on the performance elements of lecturing, or applied improvisation). Drama departments, or local comedy improvisation groups may offer classes, drop-in workshops or bespoke training sessions, and will be able to identify local performers who run workshops too. Two online sources we have found valuable are DramaResource.com, and the Applied Improvisation Network. In our experience, a one-day training workshop is sufficient to cover the key performance and improvisation skills, and a follow-up meeting or two (bringing together performers only) is required to create and rehearse the characters in their scenarios. Let us be clear that TT does not require lecturers to have acting experience or theatrical talent – in fact the most important quality is a willingness to try something new and creative, and put self-consciousness and the traditional detached teacher role to one side.



It is essential, first and foremost, to take the teaching method seriously, while taking ourselves somewhat less so!

## CONCLUSION

This article presents a teaching innovation, TT, developed in the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia between 2012 and 2016. The elements of TT set out here speak to different debates within the pedagogical literature in relation to the teachers' role in the performance, training requirements, student engagement and learning.

Our experience reveals that performing as theories draws upon elements of performance in lecturing, but goes beyond it. In TT we (teachers) perform as theories with the awareness that we are interested in conveying particular understandings to our students, to enable them to discern the differences between the theories enacted and use these in turn to make choices and distinctions about the theoretical perspectives in their own work. We found that training is a key component to provide skills and confidence to perform a theory in front of a student class.

Our experience of TT suggests that performing in TT does contribute to reshaping the relationship between teachers and students. We find that students are surprised and occasionally taken aback by the seemingly quirky performances. Especially in modules where students are then encouraged, later, to try it themselves, the boundary between teacher and student becomes more permeable and less strictly defined: the students are themselves teachers who perform for the benefit of their peer group, to provide further insight and understanding stemming from their individual study.

We also reflect on the challenges and opportunities provided by the development of TT. We have emphasised how the TT performed in our School has been the product of a team endeavour built on reciprocity. This takes time and effort and we foresee this will be a challenge to TT in forthcoming years, as some of this team diminishes in number, due to changes in staffing. However, to deal with this challenge, recruiting new interested people to the team, as well as video-recording the performances so that they can be presented to future student cohorts, and devising group-based exercises, are options we are actively exploring.

Our experience and evidence collected from evaluations of TT shows that TT is a highly-effective and engaging way of teaching theories: most students enjoy the performances, are engaged with them as new way of learning, are affected by them in terms of promoting their own thinking and reflection about the material performed. An emerging area of our work is to collect more systematic, comparable robust evidence of learning outcomes, to substantiate the various evaluations we have to date. We will be conducting longitudinal and controlled comparisons of learning impact in the coming year.

As we have shown, TT remains a work in progress but, we (and our students) think it has been effective in reaching its aims and is therefore worthwhile developing further in more and more varied settings. We thus conclude by inviting responses/suggestions/comment from readers of this journal and, above all, to encourage others to try TT for themselves, experience its benefits and challenges, and work with us to continue to bring social science theory to life in the classroom.



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## ENDNOTES

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1 Her work can be found at <http://www.theatreofadventure.co.uk/>, accessed 08.12.2016

2 See for example the Active Learning in Political Science blog, <http://activelearningsps.com/> (accessed 08/12/2016)

3 Comedy in the Classroom, accessible at <https://comedyintheclassroom.org/>

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